

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 0520

E.O. 11652:GDS

TAGS: PINT, PN

SUBJECT: EXILE OF BUSINESS LEADERS

REF: PANAMA 0519

SUMMARY: APEDE PRESIDENT ANNOUNCED AT PRESS CONFERENCE JANUARY 22 THAT TORRIJOS HAS DIRECTED VICE-PRESIDENT GONZALEZ TO SETTLE CURRENT PROTEST OVER EXILES BY REACHING AN UNDERSTANDING WITH THOSE PROTESTING. PROTEST LEADERS HAVE STATED PRIVATELY TO GOP REPRESENTATIVES AND EMBASSY THEY WOULD CEASE ALL ACTIVITY IF EXILEES ARE RETURNED TO PANAMA. END SUMMARY.

1. ORGANIZERS OF PROTEST AGAINST EXILE ACTIONS HELD PRESS CONFERENCE AT APEDE BUILDING AFTERNOON OF JANUARY 22 WITH APEDE PRESIDENT GONZALEZ DE LA LASTRA AS SPOKESMAN. ACCORDING TO PERSON PRESENT, LATTER ANNOUNCED THAT A GROUP INCLUDING REPRESENTATIVES OF CONEP, CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDEPENDENT LAWYERS' MOVEMENT MET SAME MORNING WITH VICE-PRESIDENT GONZALEZ; PRESIDENT LAKAS ATTENDED BRIEFLY. GONZALEZ DE LA LASTRA SAID VICE PRESIDENT INFORMED THIS GROUP THAT TORRIJOS HAD DIRECTED THAT PROTEST BE SETTLED BY ARRIVING AT AN UNDERSTANDING WITH ITS LEADERS. IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT THIS GROUP WOULD MEET AGAIN WITH VICE PRESIDENT EVENING OF JANUARY 22
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FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION. PRESS CONFERENCE WAS ATTENDED BY SEVERAL

INTERNATIONAL PRESS AGENCIES (INCLUDING TASS FOR PART OF SESSION), AND BY LOCAL JOURNALISTS--WHO ARE SAID TO HAVE ASKED NO QUESTIONS. IT WAS SUBSEQUENTLY AIRED OVER NATIONAL TELEVISION (CHANNEL 2).

2. SOURCE CLOSE TO LEADERS OF PROTEST HAS INFORMED US THAT ESSENTIALLY THE SAME MESSAGE WAS CONVEYED TO THE GROUP THROUGH EDUCATION MINISTER ROYO, WHO MADE CONTACT WITH GROUP REPRESENTATIVES ON JANUARY 22 THROUGH MEDIATION OF ARCHBISHOP OF PANAMA MCGRATH. SOURCE STATED THAT GROUP LEADERS INFORMED ROYO THAT PROTEST HAD NO GENERALIZED POLITICAL INTEREST, BUT WAS SOLELY DIRECTED TOWARD RETURN OF EXILES TO PANAMA. PROTESTERS CONSIDERED EXILE ACTIONS CONTRARY TO ARTICLE 29 OF CONSTITUTION (WHICH FORBIDS "EXPATRIATION" OF CITIZENS). THEY WOULD BE SATISFIED, AND WOULD IMMEDIATELY CEASE ALL PROTEST ACTIVITY, IF EXILEES WERE RETURNED TO COUNTRY AND THEN DELIVERED INTO CUSTODY OF SUPREME COURT FOR TRIAL--SOURCE WAS CONFIDENT THAT THERE EXIST NO POSSIBLE GROUNDS FOR LEGAL CONVICTION OF EXILEES.

3. LEADERS OF PROTEST HAVE FILED ANOTHER WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS ON BEHALF OF THOSE EXILED BEFORE SUPREME COURT, AND HAVE FILED A ROUGH EQUIVALENT OF WRIT OF MANDAMUS AGAINST PRESIDENT LAKAS, DEMANDING EXILEES' RETURN. SOURCE INFORMED US THAT ACCEPTANCE OF THESE PETITIONS BY GOP WOULD COMPLETELY ACHIEVE AIMS OF PROTEST LEADERS. IF ON OTHER HAND GOP REJECTS THIS COURSE AND ALLOWS EXILEES TO REMAIN ABROAD, PROTEST LEADERS SAY THEY ARE DETERMINED TO CONTINUE "RAISING HELL" UNTIL THEY TOO ARE EXILED OR JAILED, AND THEN TO CONTINUE THIS FROM ABROAD. THEY TOLD ROYO THEY WOULD ARGUE THAT EXILE ACTIONS HAVE IPSO FACTOR SHOWED GOP TO EXIST IN STATE CONTRARY TO LAW--AND THUS, THEY SAID THEY WOULD POINT OUT, A STATE WITH WHICH USG WOULD BE ON QUESTIONABLE GROUNDS IN SIGNING A NEW TREATY.

4. SOURCE STATED THAT BUSINESS SHUTDOWN, ALTHOUGH ONLY PARTIALLY EFFECTIVE IN PANAMA CITY, HAD BEEN NEARLY TOTAL IN DAVID, CHIRIQUI. SOURCE ALSO STATED THAT COUPLE OF PROTESTERS PLANNED TO SEEK ASYLUM FROM A FOREIGN EMBASSY ("NOT YOU" HE SAID WITH SMILE) TO KEEP HEAT ON GOP (COMMENT: EMBASSY WOULD SPECULATE THAT THESE MIGHT BE BROTHERS WEEDEN, WHO HAVE BEEN UNDER ORDER TO LEAVE COUNTRY BUT HAVE BEEN HOLED UP IN APEDE BUILDING SINCE CONFIDENTIAL

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TUESDAY. END COMMENT). SOURCE ALSO PROVIDED COPY OF RESOLUTION WHICH CATHOLIC CLERGY FROM CHIRIQUI DIOCESE PLANNED TO ISSUE, AND STATED THAT ENTIRE NATIONAL CATHOLIC HIERARCHY, WHICH IS MEETING BY COINCIDENCE TODAY, WAS CONSIDERING ISSUING STATEMENT DEPLORING EXILE ACTIONS.

5. SUBSEQUENT TO THIS CONVERSATION, EMBASSY UNDERSTANDS THAT EVENING TELEVISION NEWSCAST FOLLOWED COVERAGE OF PRESS CON-

REFERENCE WITH BRIEF "LATE ITEM" ANNOUNCING THAT AGREEMENT HAD BEEN REACHED IN DAVID TO REOPEN ALL BUSINESSES THERE TOMORROW, FRIDAY, AND TO HOLD MEETING FOR DISCUSSION OF SETTLEMENT. WE HAVE NO CONFIRMATION OF THIS AS YET.

6. COMMENT: SOURCE APPEARED QUITE SINCERE IN ARGUING THAT LEADERS OF PROTEST ARE NOW SEEKING NO ACTION BEYOND RETURN OF EXILEES TO PANAMA, EVEN IF ONLY FOR TRIAL, AND WOULD END PROTEST IF THIS WERE DONE. THEY CONSIDER THAT SUCH SOLUTION SHOULD BE ACCEPTABLE TO GOP, WHICH COULD EVEN CLAIM CERTAIN AMOUNT OF PUBLIC CREDIT FOR IT. ONE MOTIVATING FACTOR FOR THIS, SAID SOURCE, WAS THAT SITUATION IN INTERIOR IS UNDERSTOOD TO BE TENSE, PARTICULARLY IN DAVID. IN SUCH ATMOSPHERE, PROTEST LEADERS FEAR THAT ANY INCIDENT COULD CREATE MARTYRS, WHICH WOULD DO NO ONE ANY GOOD (PARTICULARLY, FROM THEIR STANDPOINT, SINCE SUCH MARTYRS WOULD COME FROM THEIR NUMBER). REACTION OF GOP TO THIS IS NOT KNOWN AS YET. END COMMENT.

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